

YCC: Fostering a relationship between youth and the environment

by Ryan Belz



In today's society we use a number of different methods and strategies to entice youth to engage in the natural environment. While computers and electronics help to foster such growth, true conservation and subsequently an appreciation for nature, can only come about through intense interaction with the natural environment. I don't necessarily mean that each individual must weather out a blizzard or survive days without food in the wilds of Alaska. I do mean that each individual must interact with nature to an extent that they begin to feel ownership. Without this vital element the desire to protect is lost in a myriad of competing ideologies.

What does it mean then for a refuge or for any conservation organization to break through this electronic barrier of modern society to ultimately provide the kind of experience that will foster a sense of ownership and protection within our youth? One answer to such a question comes in the form of the Youth Conservation Corps or for short the YCC. The YCC was created in the late 1980s and was based on the concept of the Roosevelt era Civilian Conservation Corps. The main idea behind the YCC program is to foster an appreciation of nature within our youth, while providing a service to many understaffed parks and refuges. At my home refuge, the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge in south central Alaska, the YCC program has been an ever-present force for decades, employing on average eight local youth supervised by two leaders in an eight-week program.

As of late, the YCC at Kenai has shifted focus. As leader, it has been my intention or aim to provide these students with a set of skills that will serve them both in the backcountry and frontcountry for the rest of their lives. Coming from a background in carpentry, trail construction and conservation, the YCC has taken on these aspects as underlying themes to our projects. Our base goals for the past two seasons have been to create structures and areas that help to minimize the impact of an outdoor based society here on the Kenai Peninsula. In many areas, we are simply loving our wilderness areas to death—to borrow an old adage from John Muir. Two such areas on the Refuge are the Fuller Lakes Trail and the Skyline Trail, both located along the Sterling Highway. Access is easy to these places as the word “highway” suggests and with good reason, for both of these trails provide users with unparalleled views of the surrounding area as well as an intense wilderness experience in a relatively short distance. With the combination of access and beauty, it's easy to understand that these trails become focal points for area recreators. It becomes our purpose then to minimize impact in order to maintain the integrity of experience for all users to these areas.

Last year, 2008, the main projects for the YCC revolved around Fuller Lakes and the construction of two new bridges at the lake outlets—one at the lower lake and a second at the middle lake. Students were involved in the entire process of bridge construction. Trees were felled on site, then debarked and trimmed to size. Using chisels and mallets, students set about carving saddle notches for cribbing and stringers. In order to protect the fragile shoreline of the lake, materials were then floated across the lake and downstream from the mill site to the bridge site. Students worked at creating a solid foundation then erected the pieces and parts they previously crafted. In a joint effort with the Kenai NWR Trail Crew, decking was milled and installed using local beetle-kill and an Alaskan Mill. The result was a solid and stable bridge, some forty-five feet in length, constructed by a now skilled YCC Crew.

This year, 2009, the YCC shifted focus from the

Fuller Lakes Trail to the Skyline Trail located just a few miles to the west. Using the same methods as employed at Fuller Lakes, students, again in a joint effort with the KNWR Trail Crew, constructed a twenty-five foot bridge over a narrow creek as well as a thirty-seven step stair system. This new stair system replaced a previous system in a severely trenched and impacted area. Perhaps the most amazing aspect of the latter project was the sheer amount of material the students hauled to the project site. Each of the thirty-seven stairs required three pieces ranging in weights from twenty-five to forty pounds each—that's one hundred and eleven pieces for a total weight of nearly two tons, all of which was carried over half-a-mile up a step mountain trail with grades sometimes approaching thirty-five percent. That two tons doesn't take into account tools and equipment, food and water as well as tired and aching bodies.

These projects serve a two-fold purpose. Not only do the bridges and stairs serve to consolidate and minimize impact to fragile areas; they also serve to bridge the gap between youth and their environment. Stu-

dents spend weeks and months in wilderness areas constructing these structures using only their hands and few simple tools, pouring their blood, sweat and sometimes tears into each project. Through this interaction they form an intense bond with their project, project area and fellow students. Many of the students will spend the week traversing a trail, sometimes dozens of times in just a few days while transporting equipment and materials, then turn around and bring their family and friends back on the weekend in order to show off what they have accomplished. These areas become sacred and it's easy for me to image that these students will make the pilgrimage back year after year, perhaps even one day bringing their own children. If this is the best we can do to foster a relationship between youth and their environment—then I say job well done.

Ryan Belz has served as the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge YCC Leader for two years. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.